

# COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

## DESCRIPTION

Community Interviews are formal information gathering sessions. Typically, they are one-on-one interviews conducted in the citizen's home or office; occasionally, however, phone interviews or *Focus Groups* may also be appropriate.

Community Interviews are a tool to use to help you construct another, more useful tool, a *Community Involvement Plan*. Community Interviews allow you to gather information about the site's community and to learn what information the community wants from EPA. Community interviews also can yield information valuable to the site team and establish a positive relationship with the community.

## REQUIRED ACTIVITY?

Yes. The NCP [40 CFR § 300.430(c)(2)(i); 300.415(n)(3)(i); and 300.415(n)(4)(i)] requires the Agency to "conduct community interviews with local officials, community residents, public interest groups, or other interested or affected parties, as appropriate, to solicit their concerns and information needs, and to learn how and when citizens would like to be involved in the Superfund process."

## MAKING IT WORK

### WHEN TO USE

**During remedial actions**, interviews take place after the site is formally listed on the National Priority List (NPL) and before the remedial investigation/feasibility study (RI/FS) begins. The interviews are necessary for developing the *Community Involvement Plan*, which must be made final *before* the RI/FS begins. Therefore, the interviews should begin when the site is listed on the NPL, and be completed by the time the Site Team begins preparing the RI/FS work plan. If you used the *Hot Sites Template* and determined that a community needs more EPA attention, consider conducting the interviews before the site is listed on the NPL. This will help establish a positive relationship with the community and give the Site Team early insight. Although they can be delayed until the Remedial Project Manager (RPM) knows when RI/FS work will begin, early interviews are more helpful. Early interviews provide information to the Site Team for developing their RI/FS work plan. When updating the *Community Involvement Plan*, interviews should be done far enough in advance to enable you to complete the *Community Involvement Plan* before the deadline.

The interviews to complete the initial *Community Involvement Plan* are less effective after the RI begins and are totally ineffective if they occur after the FS begins. Interviews should not be scheduled during certain times of the year, such as national and religious holidays.

**During removal actions**, begin conducting the interviews as soon as it becomes obvious that the removal action will last more than 120 days or that removal planning will take longer than six months. In both cases, the interviews are necessary to complete the *Community Involvement Plan*.

Know when special events occur in your community. Without competing with the event, perhaps you can participate or have a table there so that people can talk with you. Avoid the week of April 15 (taxes). It is a stressful week for everyone.



[See Focus Groups, Tab 17](#)



[See Community Involvement Plans, Tab 7](#)



[See Hot Sites Template, Tab 19](#)

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## How to Use

Meet with the RPM or On Scene Coordinator (OSC) and the Site Assessment Manager (SAM) as a first step; they may have good community insight. They can tell you about potential interviewees and what to expect when you go into the community. They may want you to dig for specific information during the interviews, such as little-known practices that could have contributed to site conditions.

Try to know as much as possible about the area. Demographic information is valuable. Use **LandView** to understand community demographics before you arrive. Check the Geographical Information Systems (GIS) capabilities of your EPA Regional Office. Other online databases such as *Envirofacts*, *Surf Your Watershed*, and the **Department of Housing and Urban Development's** database maps may be useful. Before you begin planning, know from which groups you want to draw your sample of interviewees. Make sure you include all segments of the community.

EPA prefers that CICs conduct interviews personally. The CIC usually brings a contractor to take notes. If possible, have the RPM or OSC present as well, at least for some of the interviews. This helps the RPM understand citizen concerns. If you have limited resources but need to do more interviews, consider using **Focus Groups** to supplement the initial 25 interviews. In this way you could easily get data from an additional 30 or more citizens without significantly impacting your resources.

## Who

Consider the role of Potentially Responsible Parties (PRPs) in your interviews. Section 300.430(c)(2)(i) of the NCP directs “[c]onducting interviews with local officials, community residents, public interest groups or other interested or affected parties, as appropriate,” and § 300.430(c)(3) of the NCP says that “PRPs may participate in aspects of the community relations program at the discretion of and with oversight by the lead agency.”

## When

Depending on the size of the sample, plan on *at least* three days to complete the interviews. Allow an hour for each interview, plus travel time between appointments, time to review each session, time for meals, etc. Set your schedule, then call everybody on the list to make the appointments two weeks before your trip (see sample call in this section). The contractor can make these calls. Do interviews in people's home unless they express another preference.

## How

Interviews should be limited to the individual and perhaps other members of the immediate household. If others come, ask if you can schedule a time just for them.

*It is critical to your success that you be on time.* Dress professionally with cognizance of community standards. Expensive suits are wrong for rural, agricultural communities, but so are bib-overalls and work boots. Some people will dress up for a visit by a federal official, and may view your casual attire as disrespectful. Be mentally prepared for anything. You never know what you will walk into. Try to avoid forming pre-conceptions of the people, the neighborhood, or the homes. Superfund and hazardous waste are alien concepts to the average person and may seem frightening. EPA is not always seen as the good guy by the general public.

[See LandView,  
Tab 10;  
Federal Agen-  
cies, Tab 16](#)



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Spend at least five minutes to establish a relaxed atmosphere, and if you can genuinely give a compliment or find a common interest then do so. Never give an idle compliment. Smile and maintain eye contact.

Consider **Cross-Cultural** issues. Examine the cultural behavioral expectations of the community and the interviewee, and modify your behavior accordingly. Often, we think we hear and comprehend an answer, but it is very possible that you have misinterpreted the interviewee's response. Restating the answer helps to ensure that you heard it correctly, and shows the interviewee that you are truly interested in understanding the comment/concern.

Be aware of your body language. Try to maintain open and friendly body language, no matter what is said or occurs during the interview. Sitting back, slumping, folding your arms across your chest all may convey lack of interest or a closed mind.

Mirror the attitude of your interviewee. This is one of the best methods you can use to put your interviewee at ease. If the individual is extremely formal and proper, you also should be. If the interviewee is very open, friendly and casual, then follow that tone. Remain impartial, never be defensive. You are not there to justify, defend, or explain the Agency's position. As hard as this may be, it is imperative that you remember your goal is to gather information about the site and the community.

Be flexible. Interviews are dynamic. Know what information you need (see accompanying list), but be prepared to respond to the situation of the moment. A planned interview is important, but you must be able to move around the agenda with the person's responses.

Assure anonymity. Many residents fear retribution for talking with EPA. This fear is often justified. Tell your interviewees that the information they provide will be combined with all of the other interviews and will be made public; but also tell them that the information will *not* be attributed to any individual, and that EPA's Office of General Counsel has determined that the list of interviewees and the interview schedule are not to be released.

After the interviews, review each session with those who assisted you. Review sessions as soon as possible, but not in front of the next person's house. Upon returning from the community, meet with the contractor and, if appropriate, the RPM or OSC to discuss the overall "feel" of the interviews. Have the contractor prepare a summary. Then reconvene the contractor and the RPM or OSC regarding the **Community Involvement Plan** (e.g., issues to address, draft deadline, etc.) Send thank you notes.

## Tips

- Consider using **Focus Groups** rather than interviews for information needs that arise after the **Community Involvement Plan** has been drafted.
- Have the RPM present if at all possible.
- Use contractor support to take notes, clarify issues, make sure nothing is missed, and prepare written summaries.
- Do not use a recording device.
- Be on time.



[See Cross-Cultural Communications, Tab 12](#)

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[See Community Involvement Impact Analysis, Tab 6](#)



- Be prepared by knowing:
  - what information you need,
  - what questions you plan to use to get it and what you plan to do with it,
  - something about the interviewee, and
  - as much as possible about the site and the community.
- Be aware of past interactions the community had with EPA and be prepared for venting.
- Be flexible.
- Use as large a sample of interviewees as possible because:
  - more data means better information;
  - better information means a better *Community Involvement Plan*;
  - 25 is the minimum, but:
    - a complex site might warrant 100 or more;
    - a small or very remote site might warrant less than 25.
- Use the *Community Involvement Impact Analysis* questionnaires in conjunction with the interviews.
- Assure anonymity.
- Manage the interview, keeping it focused and moving.
- When finished, thank the interviewee and graciously exit.
- Send thank you note.

## RELATED TOOLS/RESOURCES IN THE TOOLKIT

- [Community Involvement Plans, Tab 7](#)
- [Focus Groups, Tab 17](#)
- [Informal Activities, Tab 20](#)
- [Hot Sites Template, Tab 19](#)
- [Community Involvement Impact Analysis, Tab 6](#)

## ATTACHED ITEMS WITHIN THIS TOOL

- [Attachment 1: Target Identification and Considerations](#)
- [Attachment 2: Planning/Implementation Checklist](#)
- [Attachment 3: Sample Scheduling Call](#)
- [Attachment 4: Sample Confirming Letter](#)
- [Attachment 5: Information Needed from Interview](#)

# ATTACHMENT 1: TARGET IDENTIFICATION AND CONSIDERATIONS

## INTERVIEWS should include:

- All residents contiguous to the site
- All residents within known paths of migration
- Local officials—mayor, supervisors/council members, police chief, fire chief, solicitor
- Civic leaders—presidents of service and civic clubs (*e.g.*, Kiwanis, Rotary), Chamber of Commerce officers, PTA officers, principals, teachers, clergy (works best as a group)
- Representatives of public interest groups
- PRPs, as appropriate
- People that repeatedly show up in response to the question: “who else should we be talking to?”

## CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE TARGET AUDIENCE:

- In order to develop an excellent Community Involvement Plan, consider doing more than 25 interviews when:
  - A site is complex,
  - A site is controversial, or
  - The affected community is large, or there are multiple communities.
- If you have the resources, it might be beneficial to:
  - Structure your interviews in concentric geographic circles to see if concerns differ farther from the site, by direction from the site, or from rural to urban
- Use a map of the site and its surrounding areas to:
  - Target the Community Involvement Plan and subsequent activities, and
  - Provide a visual reference of especially contentious areas, to see if you can distinguish a pattern.
- When conducting interviews, bring a site/area map to help interviewees understand the site’s location in relationship to them.
- Know your community and consider their special needs, such as:
  - Arrange to bring along a foreign language interpreter, if necessary, or
  - A sign language interpreter for the hearing impaired.
- Remember specific community needs for future community involvement activities so that information is understandable to all.

## ATTACHMENT 2: PLANNING/IMPLEMENTATION Checklist

### INTERVIEW PREPARATION

- \_\_\_ Consult RPM/SAM regarding community
- \_\_\_ Invite RPM to be present at interviews
- \_\_\_ Choose good time to schedule interviews
- \_\_\_ Identify target area/audience for interviews
- \_\_\_ Determine the number of interviews needed for a good Community Involvement Plan (CIP)
- \_\_\_ Obtain map of site and surrounding area
- \_\_\_ Translator needed:  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Contacted/confirmed \_\_\_\_\_  
Rate \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Contractor needed for support  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Work assignment in place \_\_\_\_\_  
Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Confirmed \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Prepare the questions to be asked
- \_\_\_ Print up finalized questionnaire to be used

### ANNOUNCEMENT

- \_\_\_ Get phone numbers of interviewees
- \_\_\_ Print out your scheduling call script
- \_\_\_ Determine who makes appointments  
CIC \_\_\_\_\_  
Contractor \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Send confirming letter

### BASIC SUPPLIES

- \_\_\_ Note pads
- \_\_\_ Site and area maps
- \_\_\_ Business cards
- \_\_\_ Daily appointment schedule
- \_\_\_ Directions to each appointment
- \_\_\_ Interviewee phone numbers

### AFTER THE INTERVIEWS

- \_\_\_ Review interview with RPM and contractor
- \_\_\_ Plot especially contentious areas on map
- \_\_\_ Plan the CIP
- \_\_\_ Establish a deadline for the draft CIP
- \_\_\_ Send thank you letters to the citizens
- \_\_\_ Mail additional questionnaires

## ATTACHMENT 3: SAMPLE SCHEDULING CALL

Hi, My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm calling on behalf of the United States Environmental Protection Agency. By now you are probably aware of the \_\_\_\_\_ Superfund Site in your community. EPA believes that citizens like yourself must have every opportunity to help make decisions that affect your community.

In about three weeks, I will be in your neighborhood. I'll be conducting interviews, and I would greatly appreciate your participation. You were chosen from a list of community members, and your interview will be completely anonymous. Your answers will help EPA get a better picture of what is important about this site. The interview will also help us understand what your community wants or needs from EPA.

I'll be in town the week of \_\_\_\_\_, on *(give the choice of 4 different days)* and I would like to arrange a time that will be convenient for you to meet with me.

*(If they agree, give an example; Tuesday between 1-2 PM is taken but...)* Great! Can I meet with you at your home? Or is there another location that you might prefer? Let's plan to spend about an hour together, but it could be less.

I'll confirm our appointment before that date. If you need to reach me, please don't hesitate to call me at *(give telephone number)*. Thank you for your participation; your input can help shape this cleanup. I look forward to meeting you on *(Date, day, and time)*.

## ATTACHMENT 4: SAMPLE CONFIRMING LETTER

Dear X,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the community interviews for the \_\_\_\_\_ Site. I enjoyed speaking with you by telephone and look forward to learning more about your concerns about the site and the impact it has had on your community.

To help you get ready for our interview, I have enclosed a questionnaire that I would like to ask you to complete before we meet. This questionnaire will help both of us; it will help you get your thoughts organized for the meeting, and it will help us complete our understanding of (\*\*insert name of town\*\*) needs and concerns about the site. Your answers, which will remain totally anonymous, combined with the answers from other interviews, will help me create a community involvement plan that is specifically designed for (\*\*insert name of town\*\*).

I have enclosed a postage paid business reply envelope addressed to our contractor. When returning the questionnaire; please do *not* put your return address on it.

I have scheduled our interview for X PM on (\*\*insert day and date\*\*). If your schedule changes, I can be reached at (\*\*insert telephone #\*\*). I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

\*insert name\*


Community Involvement Coordinator



## ATTACHMENT 5: INFORMATION NEEDED FROM AN INTERVIEW

Answers to the following questions will give you a wealth of information from which to prepare your *Community Involvement Plan*. These are not meant to be the actual questions you would use during your community interviews; rather, they are the guides around which you should design your interview questions.

1. What does the individual know about the site?  
(Interpretation— you need to determine how much is known and how much is *thought* to be known; how much is accurate)
2. What/who is the source of this knowledge?
3. What does the individual think about the site?
4. What or who is the source of this opinion?
5. Does the individual want more information about the site and what we are doing?
6. How does the individual want to receive that information?
7. Is EPA viewed as a credible, trustworthy source of information?
8. What does the individual want/need to know?
9. What are the individuals fears/concerns/issues?  
Technical (including real risk, immediate versus long term risk), psychological (outrage or perceived risk), social, economic, legal.
10. How does the individual describe community concerns, issues, fears?  
Technical, psychological, social, economic, legal.
11. What is the site history relative to the community?  
Playground, recreation site, pass through, or other?
12. Is there any peculiar behavior relative to the site now?  
Currently in use (legitimate or otherwise), activist, protests.
13. Does the individual want to be involved with the process in any way beyond passively receiving information?
14. Does the individual think the community in general would like some involvement?
15. Is there a local activist or group addressing the site?  
Is this person seen as more/less credible than EPA?
16. What does the individual think the community wants to know?
17. How does the individual prefer to get information about the site?
18. How much does the individual want interaction with EPA?

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19. Who else in the community should we be talking with?
  20. How are local officials perceived within the community?
  21. How are the PRPs perceived within the community?
  22. How does the individual typically get his or her information about important issues?
  23. What is the most popular newspaper, TV station, and radio station in the area?
  24. Are there local radio or TV talk shows that EPA could use?
  25. Is there a cable TV operation with local access and local programming?
  26. Are there local civic/service clubs that could be useful to disseminate information via speeches?
  27. Are there appropriate opportunities to reach children through schools or youth groups?